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ABSTRACT

A "suburban newspaper" cannot be simply defined as a "newspaper published in the suburbs" or a "rural publication." Instead, a description of the suburb and the newspaper must be combined to arrive at a more sound definition of the term. A suburb is "an area outside the political limits of a city but in that city's standard Metropolitan Statistical Area." James E. Pollard wrote that a "newspaper" is a publication "issued at frequent and regular intervals, with a paid following of regular readers...carrying general news...editorials...and advertising." The first recognition of the suburban newspaper was in 1914 with the formation of the Suburban Publishers Association, but there was no academic recognition of the term at that time. The significance of the association was that its members acknowledged that something did exist between city and country. In 1917, at a convention of the National Editorial Association, speakers urged the publication of "suburban weeklies." However, it was not until post-World War II that the suburban newspaper flourished, coinciding, as it did, with the rapid growth of the suburbs. (DS)

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JOHN CAMERON SIM

Researchers and writers in the field of community journalism are sometimes challenged to provide specific figures to back up assertions that the number of suburban daily and weekly newspapers has been increasing steadily even though the number of "rural" weeklies is declining. "HOW MANY? Where can I find specific figures?"

Good questions--for which there don't seem to be any definitive, specific answers. The standard directories provide little help. The N.W. Ayer & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals doesn't use a symbol or classification to determine whether a newspaper is urban, suburban, or rural (and what would ANY of these terms mean?) The American Newspaper Representatives (ANR) National Directory does use an "S" to designate if a newspaper is suburban, but since newspapers classify themselves, some prefer not to be shown as suburban (for reasons to be discussed later) but many use "I" for industrial or "R" for resort, among other symbols. The section of Editor & Publisher International Yearbook devoted to weekly newspapers does not attempt to identify the type of community in which a newspaper is published. Only a few state press association ratebooks or directories provide identification of all their suburban members.

And no wonder. It appears that if a classification is to be made, it must be based on a series of arbitrary decisions. A set of terms or descriptions would have to be devised, and then it makes a great deal of difference who applies the criteria--the newspapers themselves, ratebook compilers, social scientists, or whoever.

Identification of a "suburban newspaper" turns out to have the two horns of the classical dilemma: (1) what is a suburb, and (2) what is a newspaper. Scholars have yet to come up with universally satisfactory definitions of either.

Kline[1] examined a number of definitions for the concept of suburb and concluded that a fairly general agreement exists as to what constitutes "suburbia" but that a definition for "suburb" has to be couched in terms so general as to be quite unsatisfactory, if not essentially meaningless. It is plain that there are many types of suburbs and that some change from one type to another over a period of time.

For their specific purposes, some researchers are satisfied with definitions based on factors of population, incorporation or lack of it, geographical location, commuting patterns, retail trade, etc. Some social scientists have evidently despaired of arriving at a universally acceptable definition of suburb and each writer tends to construct his own definition for his immediate purpose. A geographer[2] offers a starkly simple version: Suburb--An urban cluster with a name and administrative identity...(but) not a township or a county. A political scientist[3] offers: "A suburb may be defined as a community beyond the legal boundaries of the core city, but lying within its economic and sociological limits, and with a population at least partly dependent on the core city."

Another political scientist[4] appears to believe that the holes that can be poked in such a definition are unpatchable, and would settle for: "Strictly speaking, suburbs are places, and suburbanites are people. Even more strictly speaking, suburbs are places in the country immediately outside a city." (but how immediately; what size of city?)

An encyclopedia definition is more precise in some respects, less so in others: "An urbanized or partially urbanized area, either incorporated or unincorporated, in the vicinity of a large city with which it has close social and economic ties, but from which it is politically independent."[5] Many writers would insist that incorporation is a vital ingredient.

Dobriner[6] concludes "...a working definition of a suburb might be: Those urbanized, residential communities, which are outside the corporate limits of a large central city, but which are culturally and economically dependent upon the central city." In a later work he admitted he had found the definition too limited.

It is no doubt easier to say when a community <u>is</u> a suburb than when it is <u>not</u>, just as it is much easier to tell when a publication IS a newspaper than when it is not.

At the beginning of the 1960s Edwin G. Schwenn, writing a series on the suburban press,[7] used the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) as a means of locating and identifying suburban newspapers. He found 2,295 papers in the 202 then existing SMSA's, then estimated there were 700 papers in the 10-plus communities which could be called suburbs even though they were just beyond the borders of some large SMSA's.

The SMSA does at first glance seem to provide a tidy geographical entity for the counting of newspapers, but the researcher quickly runs into difficulties, as the Rand-McNally atlas says:

> The SMSA's are usually defined in terms of entire counties. This use of county boundaries has a number of unsatisfactory aspects, because some counties are unusually large or irregular shape....An extreme case is the San Bernardino-Riverside-Ontario SMSA, comprised of the two large

> counties of San Bernardiono and Riverside. The area of this SMSA, 27,295 sq. mi., is larger than that of the State of West Virginia and includes much of the Mohave Desert and some communities like Needles and Blythe which are nearly 200 miles from the central cities.[8]

Would Publisher Lee B. Perry of Needles, responding to a directory request for information, be likely to list his Desert Star in his town of 5,000 population about 160 miles northeast of San Bernardino as suburban? Or would Publisher W. D. Spencer, driving through the vast open spaces after attending a professional meeting in the metropolitan areas really see his Palo Verde Valley Times at Blythe as suburban?

It is indeed true, as Woodbury[9] says, "...many of the widely held notions about suburbs are untrue, many are of limited validity, others reflect conditions of a generation or more ago in a sector of our society that is changing very rapidly...Suburbs...are simply forms of land use and development, together with the concomitant political, economic and social forms or attitudes that take place relatively near to but outside of sizable cities and that are influenced materially by the economy and ways of life of these central cities."

Clearly some western and midwestern SMSA's contain communities outside of their central cities which will not fit any definition of suburban, however strained. At the other extreme we have SMSA's in the East Coast megapolis which have large cities in addition to the "central city" for which the SMSA is named. Are large daily newspapers in such cities to be arbitrarily counted as suburban newspapers, even though their publishers, staffs and readers certainly would not consider them in this category? True, there is Newsday, often called the

"largest suburban daily" yet by almost every measure is among the largest of the metropolitan dailies, with a circulation in the neighborhood of half a million.

David R. George, promotion manager of Newsday, says he considers the appellation of "largest suburban newspaper" a true one "although we do not actively promote it...We do not regard outselves as a suburban daily but as a metropolitan daily newspaper."[10]

Mr. George would accept the definition of suburb as "an area outside the political limits of a city but in that city's Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area." Yet, as he says, the Newsday people don't really regard themselves as a suburban newspaper, and his feeling would be shared by scores, perhaps hundreds of other daily and weekly newspaper staffs on papers published within boundaries of SMSA's. It is clear that the SMSA is seriously deficient as a framework within which to fit a definition of suburban newspaper.

Pinning down a specific definition of "newspaper" is no simpler. The courts have tended to accept the broadest kind of description: "All that is required is that it be secular in character, that is circulate among different classes of readers, and that it dispense information which is of interest to the general public." (Eisenberg v. Wabash, 355 Ill. 495, 189 N.E. 301-1934.)[11]

The U.S. Post Office second class mail regulations do not define a newspaper but they do spell out types of publication not eligible for the privilege: (226) Publications designed primarily for advertising purposes...(d) those that consist principally of advertising and that have a token list of subscribers, the circulation being mainly free; (227) publications designed primarily for free circulation may not qualify for second class privileges.

James E. Pollard [12] found that 42 of the (then) 48 states had some sort of statutory definition of a newspaper and that "No two states

agree as to just what constitutes a newspaper for (legal publication) purposes... the fairly common requirement of second class mailing privilege covers some statutes which otherwise do not go in great detail on these matters. This study was re-done in 1957 and no substantial change was found; states which had no statutes governing legal publications in newspapers didn't have them in 1957. Then, as now, the 40-plus statutory definitions were "neither uniform, complete, nor satisfactory." Undoubtedly many statutes have been re-worked since 1957 because of a changing technology, especially the great increase in centralized printing facilities for weekly newspapers.

Pollard decided that "A newspaper is commonly taken to be a publication issued at frequent and regular intervals, with a paid following of regular readers representative of all classes in the community, carrying general news of interest to all classes as well as editorials and other reading matter, besides advertising."[13] Studies by this author and others have shown that more weekly newspapers do not carry editorials on a regular basis than do. Students of the history of journalism know there have been efforts to sustain adless newspapers; the publications were not any less to be regarded as newspapers because they didn't have ads; and, as Pollard admitted, "no measure has yet been devised that will give a sure test for general circulation."

Newspapermen themselves have been rigorous in drawing lines of acceptability for newspapers. As Simon Michael Bessie once pointed out, "In the early days of the tabloid, aroused critics were accustomed to deliver their final blast by declaring it had no right to call itself a newspaper...and agreed that whatever form of Satanic horror it might be, it certainly was not a newspaper."[14]

Schwenn evidently was keenly aware of the definition problem when he wrote his series on the suburban press: "The local paper in the suburbs is the suburban paper, and that might be the best definition yet for those who say that there has been established no definite definition of the suburban press."[15] The simplistic definition that a suburban newspaper is one published in the suburbs seems to

evade the point as Justice Stewart did with obscenity (I can't define it but I can recognize it when I see it). With the rapid gain in popularity of central printing facilities, a suburb's newspaper is now more likely not to be published within the corporate limits of its home community.

Tracing historical recognition of the concept of a distinctive species known as the "suburban newspaper" does not provide much assistance in determining a way to count the numbers. It is obvious, of course, that the number of papers to be so described has increased in two principal ways: (1) newspapers founded in relatively recent years to serve the new communities, primarily residential, which sprang up as a result of what has been called urban sprawl, and (2) long-established rural newspapers in cities and towns which became suburban when the sprawl reached out to engulf them.

When B. B. Herbert of Red Wing, Minnesota sent out a proposal for a meeting in New Orleans in 1885 to form a national association of newspapers, one of the groups indicating interest was the New England Suburban Press Association. In publishing short biographies of former officers of NEA in 1896, Herbert referred to one of them as having been a member of the New England Suburban Press Association for 13 years, thus showing the association existed at least as early as 1883, and that the term "suburban" as applied to publishing newspapers must have been familiar to some newsmen for several years before that.

Francis Proctor, representing a Gloucester, Mass. newspaper, attended the second NEA convention in Cincinnati in 1886 as a delegate of the New England Suburban Press Association, yet Gloucester then surely could not have regarded itself as a suburb. A past president of the association was George Whitaker, editor and publisher of the New England Farmer, again not the type of publication we today would regard as "suburban". It seem fair, then, to deduce from the memberships of Proctor and Whitaker that the New England Suburban Press Association regarded itself as non-metropolitan, or sub-urban in the sense of "outside of the major city."

A search of the files of the leading publication founded in recognition of a growing interest in suburban living, the magazine Suburban Life, during its early years in the first decade of the 20th Century, reveals no mention of any such entity as a suburban newspaper, even though it carried articles or news notes on just about every other facet of suburban life. It must be admitted that there was little reference to newspapers of any size or type, but even so one would think that in the special articles on such suburbs as Framingham, Mass., Montclair, N.J., Mount Vernon, N.Y., Pasadena, Calif., and many others there would be some mention of the hometown newspaper and recognition of its special role. Not so; the closest approach is a reference to a program of the Friendly Society at Weston, Mass., which proposed to discuss the "Weston Free Press" as a topic at a meeting. It is also obvious that the concept of a suburb was different then, too. One article[16] said "...today a man may live twenty miles from his place of business, own a farm of a hundred acres, and yet call himself a suburban resident."

So far as can be determined, the first use of a term recognizing the suburban newspaper came with the organization of a Suburban (Chicago) Publishers Association in 1914 "...with Ray Peacock of the Jefferson Park Jeffersonian as president. The organization was an outgrowth of the old Cook County Press Association. Thirty publishers attended the first meeting, which was held in the Morrison hotel."[17]

The same source, in listing all the county and district press groups of Illinois as of 1925, did not mention either a Suburban Publishers Association or a Cook County association. The National Printer-Journalist lists the Suburban Publishers Association as of 1917, but with the same list of officers, so an assumption may be made that the listing from 1914 was just repeated each year through 1917. The secretary of the Cook County Suburban Publishers in 1971, Joseph L. Ferstl of Skokie LIFE, said he had no files to indicate his association had any connection with the 1914 association, his own records going back just to 1939.

It seems logical, however, that the concept of "suburban publisher" did not spring instantly into full bloom at the 1914 meeting, but that the member newspapers might have discussed problems they felt were peculiar to the suburbs and talked about a change in name of their organization for several years before actually making it. If so, however, use of the term did not receive prominence in the periodicals of that time devoted to newspaper journalism.

Will Irwin's noted series on "The American Newspaper"[18] was devoted solely to metropolitan newspapers and did not show any recognition of a concept of suburban newspaper (but then he didn't write about any non-metropolitan papers.)

An earlier series with the same title, appearing in The Bookman magazine in 1904, did not recognize the suburban paper as a separate form and was confined to a consideration of two types as in a passage: "Here we see the principal difference between metropolitan and country reporting--the term country being used for what might more accurately be called non-metropolitan journalism."[19] Early histories of journalism and biographies of leading journalistic figures do not include the work "suburban" in their indexes. Walter Williams in his presidential address at the 10th annual convention of the National Editorial Association (NEA) July 2, 1894, said he would compare two types of journalism--"the city and the country press."[20]

However, after the Chicago group adopted the term recognizing something between city and country, it evidently came into use in other sections of the country, as shown by an address given by a Massachusetts editor and publisher at the 1917 convention of the National Editorial Association on "Issuing a Successful Suburban Weekly."[21]

The category was sufficiently well developed by 1928 to justify a monograph on "The Suburban Weekly" which took a curiously ambivalent attitude toward the type. At one point (p. 16) the author writes, "The suburban editor is then in a more influential position than any other journalist. His power is limitless..."

But on page 47 she declares, "The man who contents himself with the suburban weekly is generally not a journalist of the highest type (oof!). Why, one cannot say. His training, however, is mediocre, and his latent ability is not much better...it is probably because the suburban weekly seems to be the stepping stone to the great metropolitan field...perhaps it is because the importance of the suburban weekly and its possibilities for development have not been fully realized."[22]

Indeed, it took until the post-World War II era before the suburban weekly really flowered, and it has been the last decade which has seen the really large inflow of capital and the application of advanced technology needed to make suburban journalism a powerful force among the mass media--an investment attractive to major metropolitan newspapers, big magazines, and newspaper chains. In the period before the war texts on newspaper management did not generally recognize the suburban paper as a distinctive type.[23]

This lag in recognition is undoubtedly due in considerable part to the reluctance of communities, especially those once separated from the major cities by wide areas of open space, to accept the appellation of suburb. They once were separate, distinct towns and then, through no action or volition of their own, were engulfed by a spreading wave of urbanism. The reluctance to suffer any dimunition of identity was, naturally enough, reflected in the town's newspaper(s). "Frequently opposing the metropolitan dailies and following a particularist line is the community press. Usually they tend to support the interests of small business threatened by planning and the parochialism of suburban government."[24] It is not surprising that such town newspapers would not claim--nay, would not even accept--the title of suburban newspaper.

Where does this leave us in the search for a generally acceptable definition of "suburban newspaper;" for a method of classifying newspapers by the type of community these publications purport to serve?

With a problem.

We have already seen that the most simplistic solutions--it's a newspaper published in a suburb, or it's a newspaper published for a suburb--won't work because many papers which meet all the other criteria are not published in the suburbs they serve, and some are not published for any one suburb. Or the publication may not meet classical and statutory definitions of a newspaper, although the publication looks like one, acts like one, is read like one--"it quacks like one."

Yet there appears to be a real need to construct a suitable definition usable in counting newspapers for the purpose of studying trends in numbers and types; perhaps also for precision in setting up advertising budgets.

It is clear that the rise of the kind of technology fostering the current spread of suburban newspapers has tended to break down old, jealously guarded distinctions which newspapers had fought to get written into state statutes in order to safeguard legal notice advertising. By all odds the most dramatic example of the smashing of the kind of distinctions catalogued by Pollard in his study of state laws regarding legality of newspapers was the merger of three groups into the present Suburban Newspapers of America (SNA). Now paid circulation, voluntary pay circulation, part paid-part free, and free circulation newspapers (the shoppers) are all in the same association, seeking the same goals. They obviously feel more is to be gained by cooperation than by pointing accusing fingers at each others' methods of getting and keeping circulation.

Yet the traditional concept of newspapers, described in those laws and embedded in postal regulations, dies hard, it would seem from a remark at the 1972

meeting of the SNA publisher advisory board: "Despite all the favorable publicity you've gotten (in the rapid rise of the suburban press as a recognized separate medium) you're still thought of as weekly shoppers," said Dave Arnold, associate media director of Leo Burnett Co., big Chicago-based advertising agency.[25] That must have hurt the members of the board who have fought so long and so hard to maintain paid circulation newspapers.

And it does point up starkly the need to shape a specific definition which will eliminate, or at least reduce, these pejorative descriptions.

FOOTNOTES

1. F. Gerald Kline, Urban-Suburban Family Structure and Media Use (Minneapolis: Communication Research Division, University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication, 1966.)

2. Raymond E. Murphy, The American City--An Urban Geography (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Col, 1966, p. 36.)

3. Charles R. Adrian, Governing Urban America (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955, 1961)

4. Robert C. Wood, Suburbia: Its People and Their Politics (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1958).

5. Encyclopedia Americana (1968) Vol. 25, page 785.

6. William M. Dobriner, ed. The Suburban Community (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958, p. xvii). In Class in Suburbia, 1965, p. 26, he wrote, "Today I find that definition too limited."

7. Edwin G. Schwenn, The Press in Suburbia, reprint of articles running in The Publishers' Auxiliary from July 22 through October 7, 1961.

8. Rand-McNally 1970 Commercial Atlas & Marketing Guide (Chicago, page 4).

9. Coleman Woodbury, "Suburbanization and Suburbia," American Journal of Public Health, 45:1, pp. 1-10 (January, 1955).

10. Letter to the author, July 27, 1970.

11. As cited in Thayer, Frank Legal Control of the Press (4th ed.) Brooklyn: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1962, p. 724.

12. The Ohio Newspaper, Vol. 20, No. 6 (March, 1940) page 1.

13. Ibid., page 2.

14. Simon M. Bessie, Jazz Journalism (New York, E.P. Dutten & Co., 1938)

15. Schwenn, op. cit., page 5.

16. Thomas S. Call, "The Automobile and Its Relation to Suburban Life," Suburban Country Life, July, 1950, p. 15. ("Country" was dropped from the title with the next (August) issue).

17. H. L. Williamson, Illinois Newspaper Directory and History of Illinois Press Association, Champaign-Urbana, Ill., 1930, page 189.

18. Will Irwin, The American Newspaper, from reprint of his series of articles as they originally appeared in Collier's Magazine, January-July, 1911, edited by Clifford F. Weigle and David G. Clark (Iowa State University Press, 1969.)

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

19. "The American Newspaper" No. VIII by Edmund Ryan and Firmin Dredd, Bookman Magazine, 1904.

20. Benjamin B. Herbert, (ed.) The First Decennium of the National Editorial Association (Chicago, 1896) pp. 534-540.

21. J. C. Brimblecon, publisher, Newton (Mass.) Graphic, paper read at National Editorial Association convention in Minneapolis, MN. July 11, 1917, reprinted in National Printer-Journalist July, 1917, pp. 423-424.

22. Margaret V. Cosse, The Suburban Weekly (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928, 55 pp., foreword by Roscoe C.E. Brown.

23. For instance, Frank Thayer, Newspaper Management (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1926, or the second edition in 1938) or James E. Pollard, Principles of Newspaper Management (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937, do not mention the suburban newspaper as a type. However, Thomas F. Barnhart, writing after World War II, does place suburban weeklies in a separate category.

24. Norton E. Long, "Who Makes the Decisions in Metropolitan Areas?" in Michael Danielson, ed. Metropolitan Politics (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1966).

25. As quoted in Advertising Age, June 26, 1972.